

New Features of the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy

What new component of NAAL focuses solely on expanding our knowledge of the literacy strengths and weaknesses of the least-literate American adults?

The *Adult Literacy Supplemental Assessment (ALSA)* measures the basic, word-level literacy skills of adults at the lowest literacy levels. The 2003 NAAL participants with very low performance on a set of core screening tasks completed ALSA instead of the “main NAAL” instrument. Unlike ALSA, which measures component skills, NAAL assesses task-based performance—how well respondents perform everyday tasks such as filling out a job application or consulting a bus schedule.

Most ALSA respondents (about 5 percent of all NAAL participants) cannot read connected text, which means they cannot read the main NAAL questions. Yet they have various basic, word-level literacy skills. ALSA assesses their ability to identify letters, numbers, and words and to comprehend simple prose and documents with the aid of nonlinguistic clues (e.g., pictures) and familiar, tangible materials (e.g., food boxes and drug labels). Oral directions and questions are provided in English or Spanish and oral responses may be in either language, but the material respondents attempt to read is in English.

Educators and policymakers can use this to develop effective programs to address the needs of low literate adults, in such areas as employment, health, civic participation, and literacy.

What component of NAAL provides a new type of information about the literacy skills of *all* Americans age 16 and older?

The *Fluency Addition to NAAL (FAN)*, first used in 2003, is administered to all NAAL respondents, from the least- to the most-literate. FAN tasks include reading aloud from word lists and text passages. FAN uses speech-recognition software to assess the ability of adults to decode, recognize words and read with fluency; words per minute and reading accuracy are recorded for analysis and scoring. Oral directions and questions are provided in English or Spanish, at the participant’s choice, but answers must be in English.

FAN makes it possible, for the first time, to compare scores for the basic literacy skills measured by FAN with performance results from the task-based main NAAL. FAN also provides additional information on skills among the least-literate adults, adding to what is learned from ALSA. Adult education providers, in particular, can use information from FAN to develop appropriate instruction and courseware for literacy and professional training.

How and why was the background questionnaire enhanced for the 2003 NAAL?

The 2003 background questionnaire collected more background information relevant to today’s policymakers and stakeholders than the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS). For example, in addition to information about age, race/ethnicity, gender, language, education, income, and employment, the 2003 questionnaire collected information

about past and present participation in welfare; job-related training; use of technology, including computers, e-mail, and the Internet; health-related conditions and activities; and literacy practices such as parents' reading to their children.

NAAL tracks the literacy performance of adults with various characteristics identified by the questionnaire. A better understanding of the relationship of background characteristics to low literacy performance—and of the literacy needs of specific audiences—will enable policymakers and program directors to develop more effective programs and services targeted to the specific needs of identified segments of the population. For example, federal and state policymakers can use such information to improve literacy services that narrow the gap between low- and high-performing groups, to inform workplace literacy and job training programs, and to encourage further research on the factors associated with low literacy.

What is the new health literacy component of NAAL?

The health literacy component of NAAL is the first national assessment designed to measure and score health literacy. The *health literacy score* reflects the ability of adults to apply literacy skills to read and understand health-related materials and forms. The score is derived from 28 health-related questions, or tasks, embedded in the main NAAL. The health literacy score is reported for the nation's adults as a whole and for various groups of interest such as the elderly, the poor, minorities, immigrants, and the less educated. Based on the health literacy assessment, NAAL provides information on the relationships between the health literacy score and other scale scores, as well as on the relationship between the health literacy score and health background information (obtained from 10 new health-related questions in the background questionnaire). Health organizations can use this information to identify target audiences for specific types of health information and develop materials geared to recipients' literacy strengths and weaknesses.

What else is new in the 2003 NAAL?

(1) *New participant group*. Individuals over the age of 64 were included, for the first time, in all of NAAL's separate state assessments (six states chose to conduct separate assessments in 2003; out of 12 state assessments conducted previously, only Florida's included this age group). (2) *New software for data analysis*. New, specially designed AM software will speed reporting of NAAL results and also make it easier for states and researchers to conduct their own data analyses. (3) *New performance levels*. The National Academy of Sciences, in an open process based on 2003 NAAL scores and other input, will set new performance levels that identify, for example, a minimal level of basic literacy that adults need to function in society. (4) *New scoring*. Inclusion in 2003 of a "partially correct" category for selected questions, in addition to "correct" and "incorrect," allows for a more nuanced measure of ability. Because data on partially correct responses were collected in 1992, although not used in reporting, this change does not affect the trend scale from 1992.

For more information about NAAL and its components, visit the NAAL website at <http://nces.ed.gov/naal> or contact Sheida White, NAAL Project Officer at the National Center for Education Statistics, by e-mail at Sheida.White@ed.gov.